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GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AGENDA AND INCULCATION OF SOFT SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on the what, why and how of the "employability agenda" and inculcation of soft skills in higher education based upon a review of relevant literature and a recent questionnaire survey conducted by the author. It begins by providing an overview of the growing concern for graduate employability and soft skills in higher education. The paper subsequently delves into the importance of soft skills, soft skills sought by Malaysian employers, soft skills lacking in Malaysian graduates, soft skills needed by Malaysian graduates to enhance their employability in the twenty-first century workplace, core components of lifelong employability, and the need for a paradigm shift in higher education pertaining to the employability agenda. The paper ends with discussing the most common approaches to developing soft skills among graduates and making recommendations for implementing the employability agenda in higher education institutions.*

Keywords*: employers, graduate employability, hard skills, higher education, soft skills*

Introduction

The employability agenda in higher education today is no longer an option; it's a key strategy for higher education institutions to maintain the competitive edge in today's highly competitive global market. Employers worldwide expect graduates to "hit the ground running" whilst graduates greatly value employability, as "jobs for life" are increasingly becoming scarce. Employability is also important because it resonates with the requirements from professional bodies. Thus, it's not uncommon for universities worldwide to boast about their graduate employability rates in trying to attract students. The employability agenda has recently made great headway worldwide, particularly in the United Kingdom, Australia, USA, Canada and Southeast Asia. Indeed, the teaching and learning of soft skills have become "significant drivers in defining quality in university teaching and learning" (Sharp & Sparrow, 2002, p. 1). Additionally, there are even annual employability ranking of universities around the world–*QS Graduate Employability Rankings* and *Times Higher Education Global University Employability Ranking*–conducted to determine which universities excelled at preparing students for the workplace. Simply put, it has now become an important role of universities to assist students to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and personal attributes which will empower them to excel at the workplace.

Employers worldwide (including Malaysia) want well-rounded graduates who possess discipline-specific knowledge and skills (hard skills), desired soft skills, and preferably, relevant work experience (typically attained through internships or part-time jobs). Unfortunately, employers are facing a "soft skills gap" wherein a substantial number of

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fresh graduates lack the desired soft skills to meet the demands in the workplace. In a recent survey conducted by LinkedIn (Berger, 2016), 59% of 291 U.S. hiring managers said they had difficulty finding candidates with soft skills. Similarly, a year-long study (2016) by Singapore Management University and J. P. Morgan has also revealed the soft skills gap in the ASEAN economies of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.

Malaysian employers too lament about the lack of soft skills among Malaysian graduates (*The Star*, 10 August 2015, p. 12). The lack of soft skills has contributed greatly to graduate unemployment in Malaysia, besides factors such as low proficiency in English, lack of relevance of university majors to jobs available, and lack of work experience (Cruez, 2005; Hariati, 2007; Razak, 2005). In 2015 the number of unemployed Malaysian graduates was 161,000 (*The Malay Mail*, 12 May 2015). In 2016 there were about 200,000 unemployed Malaysian graduates (*The Sun*, 15 February 2016). Currently, one in four fresh Malaysian graduates remains unemployed for six months after graduation.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has identified seven soft skills that should be possessed by all graduates: communication skills; critical thinking and problem solving skills; team-working skills; lifelong learning and information literacy; entrepreneurship skills; professional ethics and morality; and leadership skills. In 2007, MoHE directed all public universities to establish "finishing schools" to conduct soft skills courses aimed at enhancing graduate employability. In 2008 MoHE introduced a more structured internship programme for final-year students in public universities. According to Dato' Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, Higher Education Minister, this programme will provide more opportunities for students to gain early exposure to the workplace environment (Bernama, 3 June 2008). In 2015 MoHE introduced an Integrated Cumulative Grade Point Average (iCGPA)–a "complete report card" reporting both academic performance and mastery of soft skills–as a pilot programme involving around 300 first-year students from five public universities (*The Star*, 16 August 2015). Most recently, MoHE has directed all higher educational institutions to implement a 2–3 credit module on soft skills as another initiative aimed at enhancing employability of Malaysian graduates.

It is generally accepted that universities should enhance graduate employability (besides providing disciplinary knowledge) and that employability skills are actually part and parcel of "learning". Numerous universities worldwide have given strong emphasis on enhancing graduate employability. For example, Leicester University assures students that they will have "the extra dimension that will make them the standout choice for employers" and the University of Exeter has declared that equipping "students with the skills, experiences and mind-sets to enable them to make smooth transitions into the world of work" as one of its top priorities. Virtually all universities in Australia and numerous universities in other countries (e.g. The University of Edinburgh, Liverpool John Moores University, University of Wolverhampton, University of Luton, University of Texas, University of Pittsburgh, Alverno College, the University of Guelph and Singapore Management University) have identified specific generic competencies that graduates should develop to enhance their employability.

Nevertheless, some academicians still cling to the traditional view that universities should focus on disciplinary knowledge and that a focus on employability skills dilutes the value

of academic learning. Employability is viewed as an "alien" discourse that interferes with the dissemination of disciplinary knowledge. As implied recently by one Vice-Chancellor of a Malaysian public university, the purposes of education should be fixated on "learning" and not "earning" and that educationists should not dance to the tune of the marketplace (Dzulkifli, 2009). In short, some academicians are of the view that it is not the responsibility of higher education institutions to produce "work-ready" graduates.

What Is Graduate Employability?

According to Harvey (1999, p. 4), "Employability of a graduate is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for the future effective functioning of their organization". Hillage and Pollard (1998, p. 2) define employability as "the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realize potential through sustainable employment". Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2004) define employability as "The relative chances of finding and maintaining different kinds of employment" (cited in Ranjit, 2011, p. 3). Bologna's Working Group on Employability defines employability as "the ability [of graduates] to gain initial meaningful employment or to become self-employed to maintain employment and to be able to move around within the labour market" (Working Group on Employability, 2009, p. 1) To sum up, employability can be generally defined as having a set of competencies (knowledge, skills and personal attributes or dispositions) that makes an individual more likely to gain sustainable employment and to be successful in his or her chosen occupation(s). It encompasses both hard and soft skills.

How is "being employed" (employment) different from "being employable" (employability)? Being employed simply means that an individual has a job whereas being employable refers to having the attributes necessary to sustain employment and to thrive in the workplace. According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), individual employability depends on four factors: assets in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes; the way these assets are used and deployed; presentation of assets to employers; and the context within which the individual seeks work (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment).

What Are Soft Skills?

According to Towner (2000), soft skills refer to "those attributes that enable effective teamwork, communication, presentation, leadership, customer service, and innovative problem solving" (cited in James & Baldock, 2004). Kate Lorenz (2005), editor of CareerBuilder.com, defines soft skills as "a cluster of personal qualities, habits, attitudes and social graces that make someone a good employee and a compatible co-worker" (cited in Ranjit, 2011, p. 6). In a similar vein, Moss and Tilly (2000) define soft skills as "skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behaviour rather than to formal or technical knowledge" (cited in Ranjit, 2009, p. 6). According to Robles (2012, p. 457), soft skills "are made up of the combination of interpersonal (people) skills and personal (career) attributes". Simply put, soft skills can be defined as non-technical intrapersonal and interpersonal traits and skills that are required to get a job and to thrive in the workplace. It should be noted that the term "skills" is being used loosely to incorporate personality traits, habits and attitudes of employees.

Soft skills are not job-specific; they are valued across a variety of jobs, fields and organizations, regardless of position or title. Soft skills are essential for effective performance in a broad range of jobs and are transferable across workplaces. There is no one definitive list of soft skills. MacLeod (2000) identifies the following as soft skills: ability to communicate effectively, creativity, analytical thinking, problem-solving skills, leadership skills, team-building skills, listening skills, diplomacy, flexibility, change-readiness, and self-awareness (cited in Ranjit, 2011, p. 6).

Why Are Soft Skills Important?

Soft skills are important for five major reasons. First, soft skills are important for employability due to the emergence of the knowledge-based economy and proliferation of high-performance workplaces (characterized by a focus on quality products and services, participatory management style, reduced supervision, increasing use of cross-functional teams to accomplish tasks, multiple responsibilities, and being customer-oriented). There is a greater demand for knowledge workers with a strong orientation towards interpersonal skills, teamwork, creativity, and lifelong learning. In the words of Clive Muir (2004), "The effective knowledge worker works in teams, multitasks, and is a critical and creative thinker" (cited in Ranjit, 2011, p. 11). According to Sutton (2002, p. 1), "In recent years, soft skills have become the No. 1 differentiator for job applicants in all types of industries." Recruiters currently take academic performance and technical competence as givens; what really enables one to stand out from the crowd is soft skills. Employers worldwide are increasingly looking for graduates with positive personal attributes (particularly integrity, achievement orientation, proactivity and willingness to learn) and strong abilities in communication, human relations, teamwork, and problem solving, besides academic qualifications, computer literacy, and work experience. What makes soft skills extremely valuable, according to Guy Berger (an economist at LinkedIn), is that "hard skills vary based on the job, but soft skills are required for every job" (cited in Brooke, 2016).

Based upon a questionnaire survey conducted in 2016 by the author involving 288 Malaysian human resource and hiring managers from 93 companies, 45% of the respondents ranked soft skills as the most important criterion in hiring fresh university graduates followed by academic background, proficiency in the English language, job interview performance, graduate's "fit" with company culture, and internship/relevant experience. Similarly, a 2015 Graduate Outlook Survey conducted by Graduate Careers Australia and a 2014 survey of UK graduate employers conducted by education provider, Kaplan, revealed that soft skills were valued more highly than technical knowledge when recruiting graduate employees.

Second, soft skills are crucial for ensuring the success of graduate employees in the workplace and continued progress in their career (Hager, Holland & Beckett, 2002). A study conducted by the Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie Mellon Foundation involving Fortune 500 CEOs found that 75% of long-term job success depended on people skills, and only 25% on technical knowledge. Research also indicates that 87% of persons losing their jobs or failing to be promoted were found to have "improper work habits and attitudes rather than insufficient job skills or knowledge" (cited in Ranjit, 2011, p. 12). Soft skills (particularly being organizational savvy) also enable graduate

employees to understand and adapt successfully to the cultural norms of the workplace. In short, soft skills separate stars from average performers at work.

Third, soft skills enable graduate employees to optimize their personality and personal productivity primarily through learning self-awareness; bolstering self-esteem and resilience; maintaining self-objectivity; cultivating good values and manners; developing a strong work ethic; projecting themselves positively; and managing their time successfully.

Fourth, soft skills contribute towards enhancing graduates' moral intelligence, which consequently empowers them to act ethically with a strong sense of integrity and responsibility towards society.

Finally, in today's world, knowledge is often out-of-date in 3 to 4 years and graduates need to be prepared adequately for an unknowable future. Any undergraduate course based primarily upon acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge is inadequate for thriving in today's increasingly dynamic and complex world. Hence, graduates too need to become lifelong learners; being open to new ideas and new ways of thinking.

Soft Skills Sought by Malaysian Employers

The most highly-valued soft skills generally sought by employers worldwide in fresh graduates are a strong work ethic (integrity, diligence, punctuality, initiative, reliability, obedience), oral and written communication skills, interpersonal skills (relating well with others), ability to work in multi-cultural teams, problem solving and decision making skills, achievement orientation (drive), resilience, planning and organizing skills, ability to work independently with minimal supervision, and willingness to learn (The Council for Industry and Higher Education, 2008; Institute of Directors, 2007; International Herald Tribune's Global Employability Survey, 2012; Kaplan 2014; Kate Lorenz, 2009; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2012). Employers are recruiting for attitude and training for competence (Kaplan, 2014).

Based upon a questionnaire survey conducted by the author in 2016 involving 163 human resource managers and 125 hiring managers, the top ten soft skills sought by Malaysian employers in fresh graduates are a strong work ethic (integrity, punctuality, initiative, diligence, dependability and willingness to learn), communication skills, achievement orientation (self-motivation), interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, high self-esteem (self-confidence), resilience, critical thinking, problem-solving and decision making skills, and personal presentation.

Soft Skills Lacking in Malaysian Graduates

Employers worldwide have generally stated that fresh graduates often have technical skills but most of them lack the soft skills necessary to thrive in the workplace (Barton, 2012; Davidson, 2016; Harris, 2013). According to a 2012 international study involving 2700 employers from nine countries (including India, Saudi Arabia, Germany, United Kingdom and the United States), less than half of employers opine that fresh graduates are adequately prepared for entry-level positions (Mourshed, Farrell and Barton, p. 18). Malaysian employers too lament about the lack of soft skills among fresh graduates. According to them, Malaysian graduates lack self-confidence; communication skills; a

strong work ethic (primarily initiative, conscientiousness, willingness to "walk the extra mile"); critical thinking and problem-solving skills; and are poor team players (Ambigapathy, 2005; Sonia, 2008). According to a graduate employability survey conducted by TalentCorp and the World Bank in 2014, the major soft skills lacking in fresh graduates are communication skills, creative/critical thinking skills, analytical skills problem solving skills and ability to work independently (Malaysia Economic Monitor, 2014, p. 24).

Soft Skills and Employability in the Twenty-First Century Malaysian Workplace

According to a survey conducted by the author in 2004 involving 258 Malaysian private sector managers from various functional areas, the top ten soft skills required to succeed in the twenty-first century workplace are integrity, achievement orientation (self-motivated with an inner desire to excel), ability and willingness to learn, proactivity/initiative, teamwork, customer service orientation, being able to work independently, critical thinking skills, self-confidence and interpersonal skills.

Based upon the author's extensive literature review and local research, the soft skills that Malaysian graduates need to enhance their employability in the twenty-first century workplace can be categorized into three major clusters: *Personal Competence*, *Interpersonal Competence* and *Thinking Skills* (see Figure 1).

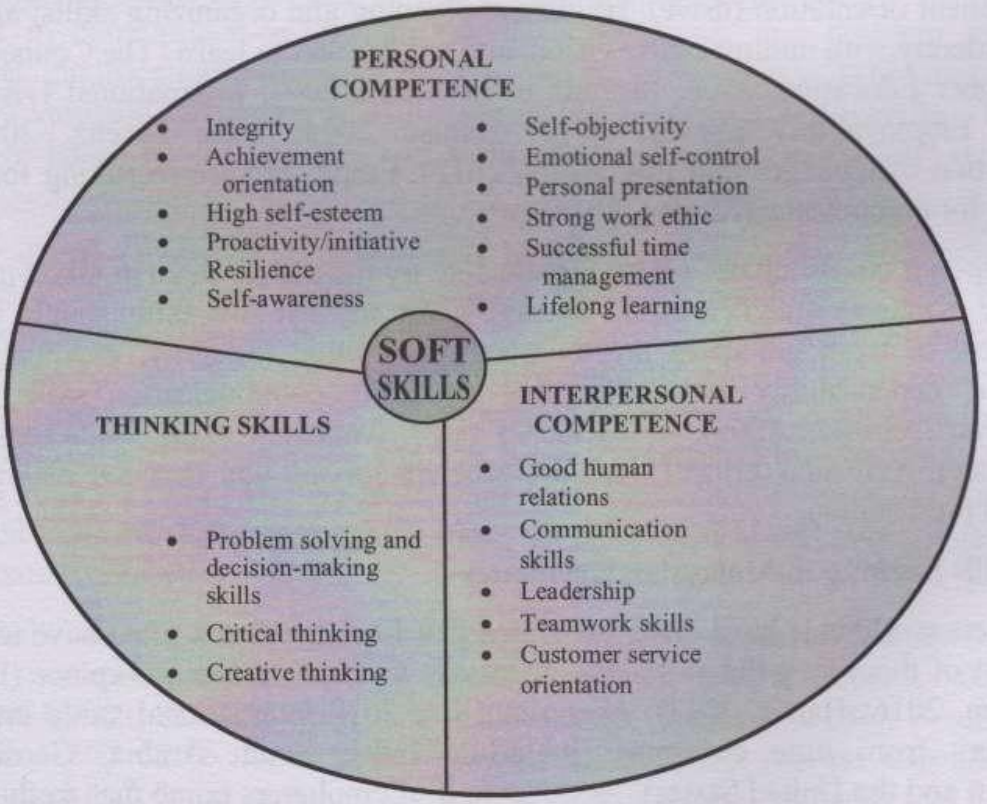

Figure 1: Soft Skills Needed for Enhancing Employability of Malaysian Graduates

The new career management paradigm is not so much about getting employed but remaining employable. In the words of Peter Hawkins (1999, p. 3), "To be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure." The average worker in the twenty-first century will likely make seven to ten job changes over a career lifetime and change occupations two or three times before retiring from work (Lock, 1996). Graduates will have to become self-reliant and to assume ownership of their careers (Hall & Moss, 1998).

As shown in Figure 2, there are five core components of lifelong employability: hard skills, soft skills, work experience, personal branding and presentation, and lifelong learning and networking. "Hard skills" are disciplinary knowledge and technical skills associated with performing a job; they are job specific. Hard skills are of vital importance for securing about one-third of graduate jobs, particularly in the fields of medicine, engineering, accounting and law.

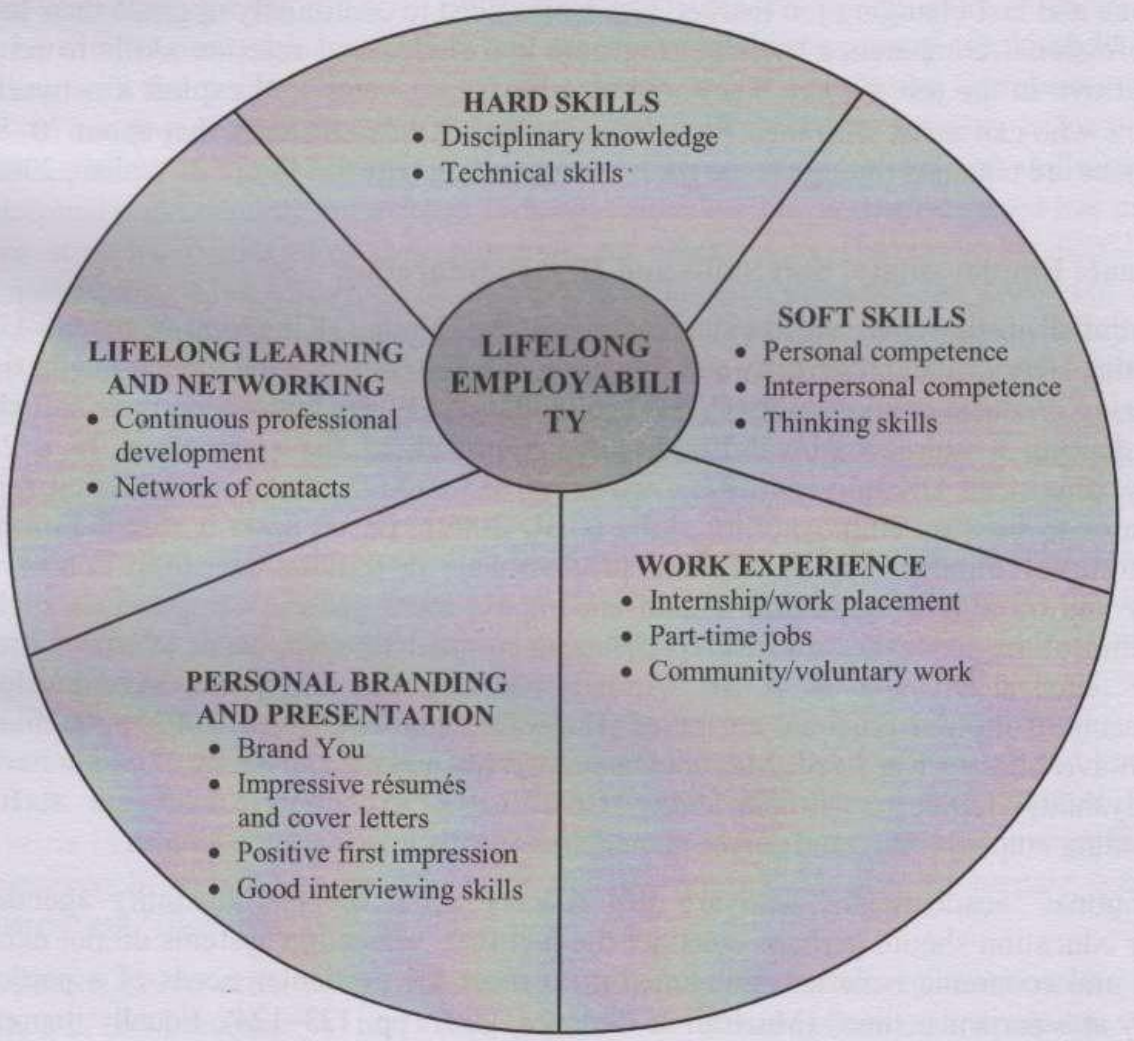

Figure 2: Core Components of Lifelong Employability

As discussed earlier in the paper, soft skills are crucial for enhancing graduate employability. For most jobs, hard skills often have little value if one has poor soft skills. Soft skills also separate stars from average performers at work.
Employers also value relevant work experience in fresh graduates (typically attained through internships or part-time jobs). According to the Pedagogy for Employability Group (cited in Pool & Sewell, 2007), it is widely agreed that graduates with work experience are more likely to secure employment than graduates without.

Job hunting is a sales process wherein graduates have to "sell" themselves convincingly to employers. In this regard, graduates need to develop a strong personal brand (differentiating oneself from the pack), market themselves effectively through well-written résumés, and to highlight their relevant key competencies during job interviews (besides creating a positive first impression).

Lifelong learning and networking are crucial for sustaining long-term employability in a dynamic and fast-changing job market. Graduates need to continually upgrade their levels of professional competence by acquiring new knowledge and relevant skills to remain competitive in the job market. They will also have to develop and exploit a network of contacts who can assist with their future career plans. Research shows that about 70–80% of all jobs are obtained through some form of networking (cited in Ranjit & Wahab, 2008, p. 42).

Graduate Employability, Soft Skills and Higher Education

Educational institutions worldwide, including the United Kingdom, Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Germany and Singapore are currently placing greater emphasis on enhancing graduate employability (Yim–Teo, 2004, p. 139) by buttressing their soft skills and adopting a more employability-oriented approach to the curriculum. In a 2008 survey, almost all UK universities agreed or agreed strongly that it is important for all graduates to possess employability skills (CBI, 2009). Based upon a recent European Union survey almost 75% of teaching professionals in tertiary education concur that "study and training programmes should encompass more generic competences such as communication, teamwork and entrepreneurship in order to adapt better to labour market needs" (cited in DIUS, 2008, p. 20). Virtually all Australian universities have developed statements of desired graduate attributes (Hager, Holland & Beckett, 2002, p. 9). Indeed, some universities such as Leeds Metropolitan University and the University of Exeter have an Employability Office or Employability Coordinator to support academic staff in embedding employability and career management skills into their curriculum.

"Traditional" academicians who are still reticent about the employability agenda in higher education should perhaps consider the fact that "education systems do not exist in social and economic isolation, but function to meet the particular needs of a particular society at a particular time" (Maclean & Ordonez, 2007, pp. 123–124). Equally important, academia should note that being better prepared for the workplace is part of "learning". Learning is generally defined as the process of acquiring new knowledge, skills or attitudes through instruction, study, experience or reflection. Additionally, by paying more explicit concern to graduate employability, higher education will be responding proactively to maximize the economic and social yield from public investment in higher education (Watts, 2006).

There is a dire need for a paradigm shift in higher education pertaining to the employability agenda. Higher education in Malaysia needs to reinvent itself to ensure a better fit with the changing environment characterized by globalization, increasing competition and changing expectations of students and employers. Higher education institutions must take heed that students (learners) are the primary purpose of their existence. The most important output of universities is their graduates. Universities should create powerful learning environments that meet or exceed learners' requirements. In today's fast changing world, universities can no longer focus on their traditional role as "transmitters of knowledge". Neither is teaching what is current and cutting-edge in a particular discipline adequate.

Incorporation of employability skills should not be viewed as an attack on academic freedom in terms of content, but merely a change in pedagogical techniques. As commented by The Higher Education Academy (2006, p. 6), "employability and subject-specific learning are complementary, not oppositional. What the 'employability agenda' does is to encourage teachers to use pedagogic approaches that are likely to enhance general employability whilst dealing with the specifics of a subject". The employability agenda also correlates with high quality learning (Hager, Holland & Beckett, 2002). High quality learning is learning that assists students to acquire the desired core disciplinary knowledge and soft skills; promotes conceptual understanding and critical thinking; fosters lifelong and self-directed learning; and helps students to maximize their potential. As observed by Harvey et al., (2003, p. 1) "Employability is not something distinct from learning and pedagogy but grows out of good learning". Indeed, there is increasing evidence that "incorporating employability within curricula does not detract from subject-study" (Greatbach & Lewis, 2007, pp 38–39). Additionally, the incorporation of employability skills need not necessarily involve a major overhaul of the academic courses. It usually involves "tuning" – making minor changes to content, delivery or assessment (Harvey & Knight, 2003).

The hard truth is that higher education institutions should empower learners to acquire the core disciplinary knowledge, skills and personal attributes that are necessary for them to function effectively at the workplace and in society. Focusing on knowledge for its own sake is no longer adequate and relevant. Employers are not looking for individuals who are "walking encyclopaedias" and graduates need to be prepared for a future that is largely unknown. In this regard, Barnett (2004) advocates that higher education should nurture in students qualities of criticality, self-confidence, and resilience. In the words of Richard Boyatzis (a renowned management scholar), "Graduate management programmes based on the approach of building knowledge in students are not adequate to prepare people for management" (Boyatzis, 1995, p. 51).

Numerous universities worldwide have transformed themselves to remain relevant and competitive. Teaching is no longer viewed as transmission of knowledge, but as facilitation of learning. The focus is on total development of students, not merely intellectual development. Indeed, many universities have adopted an outward-looking approach, and work closely with industry and employers. Above all, students are viewed as co-partners in the learning process. As a reflection of the transformation in higher education, the Kellogg Graduate School of Management (Northwestern University) treats

students as "partners". It works closely with industry and has introduced 50 new courses since 1995 to keep pace with changes in the business world. The mission statement of the Wharton School (University of Pennsylvania) is to "prepare business leaders with the skills and knowledge to transform global business practice, and fuel the growth of industries and economies throughout the world." Similarly, the mission of the National University of Singapore's Business School is "to advance knowledge and develop leaders so as to serve business and society." Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) places work-related learning and skills development at the heart of every undergraduate degree through its "World of Work" or WoW Skills Programme without compromising on the academic quality of its degrees. Staffordshire University has pledged to employers that its graduates "will be well-rounded, relevant, professional and more than ready to contribute to the world and to the world of work." It has expressly stated the desired six graduate attributes: being a professional, global citizen, effective communicator and a good team player, lifelong learner, reflective and critical thinker, and a discipline expert.

In Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia has identified the following as the desired graduate attributes to be developed in all graduates through the teaching-learning process: communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, teamwork skills, information management and lifelong learning skills, entrepreneurship skills, leadership skills and proactivity, and ethics and integrity. Universiti Teknologi MARA has a Personal Development Course for undergraduates pursuing the Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours) degree. The Engineering Accreditation Council (Malaysia) has stipulated that engineering graduates should possess certain generic attributes (besides disciplinary knowledge) such as communication skills, professional and ethical responsibilities, teamwork skills, and capability for lifelong learning.

Approaches to Developing Soft Skills Among Graduates

The most common approaches to developing soft skills among graduates as shown in Figure 3 are:

- Stand-alone approach wherein soft skills are taught in modules separate from their discipline studies (e.g. Personal Development, Public Speaking, Business Writing, and Critical Thinking);
- The curriculum-integrated approach that enables students to develop soft skills within the context of their discipline (with greater emphasis on oral presentations, role plays, usage of "real world" examples in teaching, group work, analysis of case-study material, etc.);
- Work-based learning which primarily require students to spend a portion of their time in the workplace;
- Student involvement in extra-curricular activities; and
- Provision of job-hunting guidance and advice through Career Services.

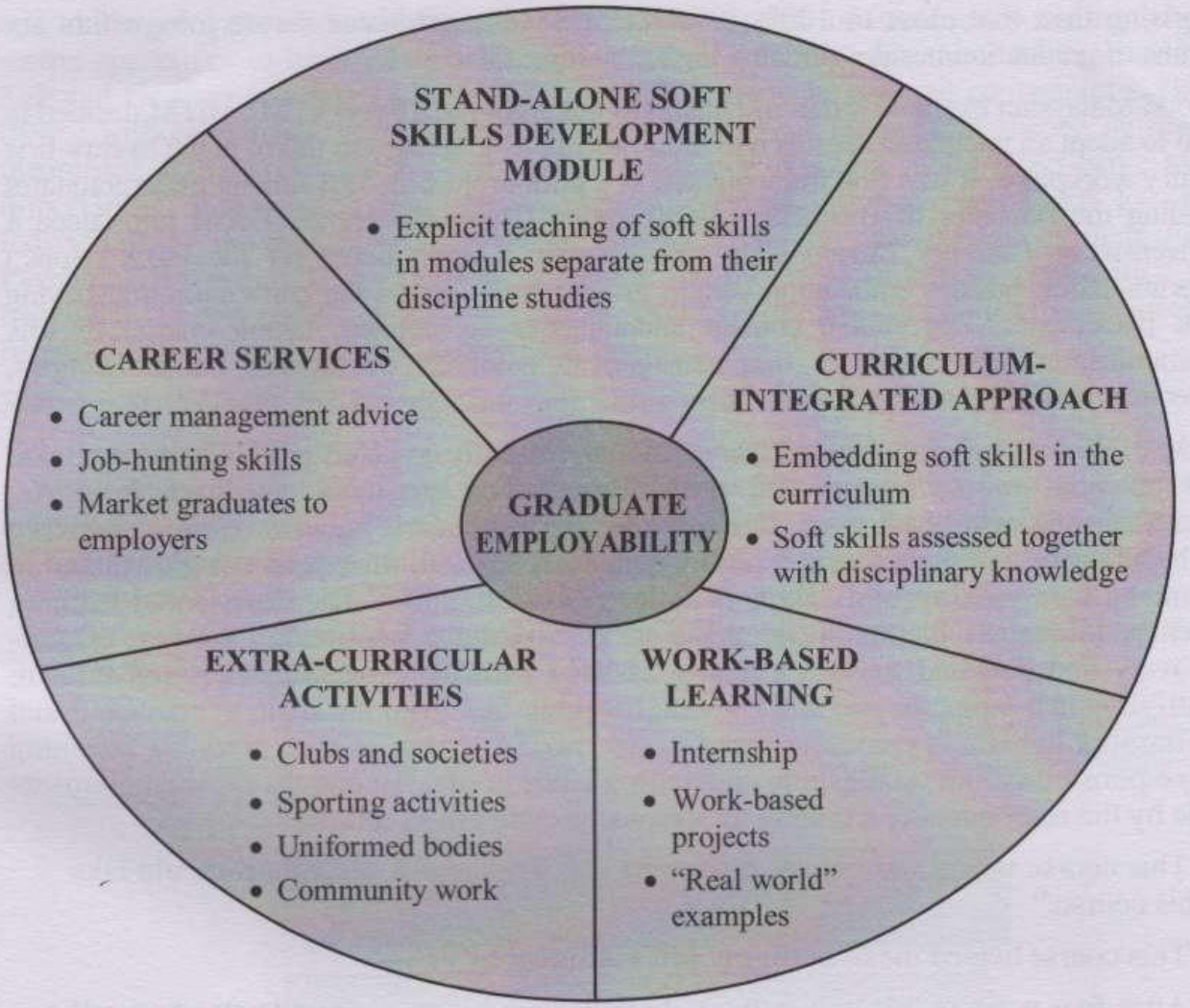

Figure 3: Enhancing Graduate Employability: Integrated Approach

Universities worldwide have adopted one or more of these approaches. As stated by Mason, Williams and Cranmer (2006, p. 4), many university departments use a mix of embedded and stand-alone approaches to enhance graduate employability skills. An integrated approach involving two or all of the above-mentioned approaches makes most sense. Undergraduates should first be provided with a theoretical framework pertaining to the soft skills. Such a framework will guide the undergraduates to effectively practise the soft skills that have been embedded across the curriculum rather than learning them haphazardly through the trial-and-error method. More importantly, a systematic and step-by-step experiential approach is needed to assist individuals to develop positive personal attributes and to take charge of their lives (the intrapersonal component of soft skills). Psychologists generally agree that self-image is the key to human personality and behaviour. In this regard, a specific learning event (experiential in nature) is required to help undergraduates develop a positive self-image. Additionally, as a discrete subject, well-trained lecturers will be teaching employability skills.

All undergraduates in the Singapore Management University (SMU) are required to complete a minimum 10-week internship with a business organization and serve 80 hours of community service. In addition, students have to pass a compulsory business etiquette and career preparation course called "The Finishing Touch" which imparts life skills such as dining etiquette, personal grooming, dressing, interview and networking skills. It is not

surprising then that close to 100% (99.7%) of SMU's graduates secure jobs within six months of graduation besides drawing higher starting salaries.

A good Malaysian example is that of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). UiTM decided in 2000 to adopt an integrated approach of empowering its graduates to thrive in the twenty-first century workplace. It was first implemented as a pilot project in 2001 among undergraduates pursuing the Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours) degree. UiTM introduced a fourteen-week *Personal Development Course* with 3 credit hours for the BBA (Hons.) undergraduates, besides embedding certain generic skills across the curriculum and having work placements. The course content encompasses self-esteem, taking charge of life, communication skills, teamwork, time management, emotional intelligence, human relations, leadership, and stress management.

UiTM's *Personal Development Course* has successfully assisted graduates to optimize their potential and to acquire soft skills. Based upon qualitative feedback from 962 undergraduates who had gone through the *Personal Development Course* between 2001–2004, 98% of them found it highly beneficial for both their personal growth and in enhancing their employability skills (Ranjit & Normah, 2005). The experiential learning activities (aimed at facilitating students to embark on a continuous journey of self-discovery and personal mastery) greatly assisted them in enhancing their self-esteem; identifying their strengths and weaknesses; breaking free from the chain of erroneous and self-limiting beliefs; overcoming shyness; and taking charge of their lives by assuming self-responsibility and establishing compelling goals in life. Among the typical comments made by the respondents pertaining to personal growth are as follows:

> "This course taught me how to overcome my weaknesses. Everyone should take this course."
>
> "This course helped me to boost my self-confidence."
>
> "After four years in this university, only now have I learned to understand myself better. And it is through this course."

With regard to employability skills, the respondents found the course highly effective in enhancing their oral and written communication skills; improving time management skills; working effectively with others (including managing conflict); improving problem solving skills; and enhancing leadership skills. Some of the typical comments are as follows:

> "This course greatly assisted me in managing my time more successfully."
>
> "This course is unique. Unlike other courses offered, it taught us to prepare ourselves for the realities of the workplace."
>
> "I now feel more confident in managing my boss and handling interpersonal conflicts effectively."
>
> "This course has boosted my confidence besides improving my communication skills."

Need for a Compulsory Stand-Alone Personal Development Module

According to James and Baldock (2004), "In order for most soft skills to be learned, they must be taught." Merely embedding soft skills across the curriculum is not likely to produce the desired impact of enhancing graduate employability due to three main reasons. First, most lecturers succumb to the pressure of concentrating to finish the syllabus; hence,

soft skills get watered down. Second, there is also a sense of inadequacy among subject matter specialists to incorporate soft skills into their teaching repertoire. As cautioned by Tait and Godfrey (cited in Lees, 2002), soft skills need to be covered competently. Third, theory without practice is of limited value; so too is practice without theory. A proper theoretical framework enables learners to practise soft skills more effectively. More importantly, a systematic and step-by-step experiential approach is needed to assist individuals to develop positive personal attributes and to take charge of their lives. Psychologists generally agree that self-image is the key to human personality and behaviour. In this regard, a specific learning event (experiential in nature) is required to help undergraduates develop a positive self-image.

Step-by-Step Guide for Integrating Soft Skills into the Curricula

1. As shown in Figure 4, the first step is to determine the core soft skills (besides disciplinary knowledge and skills) that the university hopes to develop in all of its graduates, regardless of the specific disciplines. The various departments/disciplines can add or fine-tune the desired soft skills. Sources of information for identifying the core soft skills include feedback from employers, requirements of relevant professional bodies, and literature review. The end result of Step 1 should be a clearly defined set of desired soft skills.
2. Audit current modules being taught to determine the extent to which the desired soft skills are currently being developed. Are the soft skills being explicitly taught and assessed?

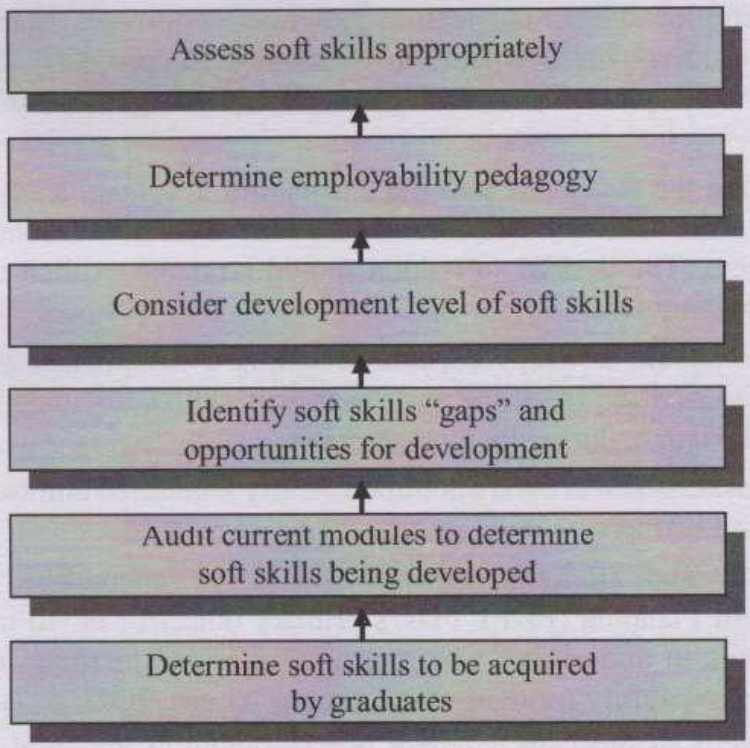

Figure 4: Integrating Soft Skills into the Curricula

Source: Adapted from Transferable Skills Project, 2006, http://www.skillsproject.ie/integrate/index.html

3. Identify any soft skills "gaps" and opportunities which may exist for optimizing students' employability.
4. Consider the level at which the soft skills should be developed (elementary, proficient or advanced).
5. Determine appropriate learning and teaching strategies for developing the designated soft skills.
6. Select appropriate sources and methods for assessing soft skills. Some soft skills are easier to assess (e.g. presentation skills, writing ability, teamwork) than others (e.g. ethics and values). The assessment criteria must be clear and easily understood (e.g. using scoring rubrics). There are a variety of assessment sources: lecturer assessment, peer assessment, group assessment, self-assessment, and external observation. Depending on what exactly is being assessed, there are a variety of assessment methods such as written assignment, group project, portfolio, reflective journal, case assessment, and oral presentation.

Recommendations

1. Universities should determine the attributes that should be acquired by its graduates to thrive in the workplace and to function effectively in society. What soft skills should graduates possess besides disciplinary knowledge and skills?
2. Universities should adopt a holistic and integrated approach towards enhancing graduate employability: curriculum-integrated approach, stand-alone soft skills modules, student involvement in work-related projects and extra-curricular activities, work placements, and guidance on job-getting skills through Career Services.
3. In embedding the soft skills into the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment processes, steps must be taken to ensure that there is a "constructive alignment" between them. The desired soft skills should be made explicit through the learning outcomes of modules.
4. Universities should seriously consider adopting a compulsory stand-alone *Personal Development Module* (focusing on major soft skills) for undergraduates. It should preferably be taught during the first semester.
5. Soft skills assessment criteria should be clearly stipulated and explained to all assessors and learners.
6. Self-directed and lifelong learning should be encouraged through Personal Development Planning (PDP). PDP's primary objective is "to improve the capacity of individuals to understand what and how they are learning, and to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning" (Lees, 2002, p. 7).
7. Academic staff should have a proper understanding of the employability agenda and should model the desired behaviour. Academia should be convinced that "employability is not toxic to academic values" (Harvey & Knight, 2003). The

employability agenda should be viewed positively as "supporting good learning, enhancing students' chances of obtaining appropriate employment, and helping students to develop proficiencies that will be useful in life generally" (Yorke, 2003, p. 10). It is also crucial to create "employability champions" in each department.

Conclusion

It is crystal clear that higher education institutions should provide a well-rounded learning experience with enhancing graduate employability as a core component since work forms a major part of most people's lives and all jobs require soft skills. Besides providing essential disciplinary knowledge and skills, undergraduate education should prepare learners for employability, good citizenship, and lifelong learning. According to Duderstadt (2000), ex-President Emeritus of the University of Michigan, obsolescence lies in store for universities that fail to adapt to the rapidly changing world and to serve society. Academic leaders need to be reminded that the most important output (and stakeholder) of universities is their graduates. Hence, universities owe it to their graduates and themselves to empower graduates to thrive in the twenty-first century workplace and to function as productive and responsible citizens.

Accordingly, higher education institutions should adopt an integrated approach towards empowering graduates with generic competencies required for them to thrive in the twenty-first century workplace. Based upon the success of UiTM's *Personal Development Course*, it is recommended that undergraduates be provided with a theoretical framework pertaining to the generic competencies, besides embedding them across the curriculum and reinforcing through work placements. Particular emphasis should be given to assisting undergraduates develop a positive self-image which is the key to changing one's personality and behaviour.

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